

Great Communicating: Learning from Ronald Reagan's Public Appeals to Address the Obesity Epidemic in America

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Presidents of the United States face the formidable challenge of executing their policies and programs, while balancing relationships with political actors that are outside of their control and with whom they must share power. The Congress, the Supreme Court, the press, interest groups, and the public are five main actors whose needs and interests merit attention and who can significantly contribute to presidential power. This paper specifically addresses the dynamic relationship between President Reagan and the American public. It uses his success with the "War on Drugs" and his failure to address the HIV/AIDS crisis as case studies to demonstrate the potential power of this relationship. Building on this hypothesis, the paper advocates that President Bush engage the American public to successfully execute programs to fight the obesity epidemic within the United States. Reagan serves as an example from which future presidents can learn as they craft their relationship with the American public. This relationship is critical as modern presidents appeal to the public for support to accomplish their agendas.

"You know, I think if I had to have a mentor, a public figure that reminded me on a regular basis about the power of freedom and liberty, it would have been Ronald Reagan."¹

~ President George Bush during interview with C-SPAN founder Brian Lamb

It is clear that President George Bush looks to Ronald Reagan as an example of how to conduct foreign policy. President Bush would also do well to reflect on Reagan's experience with domestic social issues during the 1980s, to determine how to handle the current obesity epidemic in America. Two examples from Reagan's social policy demonstrate how President Bush should take action to engage the obesity issue:

¹ Sammon, Bill. "Bush Calls Reagan Mentor, Lincoln Greatest." *The Washington Times*. 29 Jan 2005. <http://www.washtimes.com/national/20050128-111517-5673r.htm>

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188
<p>Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188), Washington, DC 20503.</p>			
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED	
	4. May.05	MAJOR REPORT	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE GREAT COMMUNICATOR: LEARNING FROM RONALD REAGAN'S PUBLIC APPEALS TO ADDRESS THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC IN AMERICA		5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) 2D LT DOYLE SUSAN L			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) HARVARD UNIVERSITY		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER CI04-1056	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) THE DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE AFIT/CIA, BLDG 125 2950 P STREET WPAFB OH 45433		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES			
12a. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Unlimited distribution In Accordance With AFI 35-205/AFIT Sup 1		12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE	
13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)			
<p style="text-align: right;">DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A Approved for Public Release Distribution Unlimited</p>			
14. SUBJECT TERMS		15. NUMBER OF PAGES 16	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT		18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE	
19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT		20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	

Reagan's successful partnership with the American public to fight the "War on Drugs," which illustrates the rewards for successful action and how the right public move can pay short term dividends, and Reagan's failure to adequately engage the HIV/AIDS epidemic during his presidency, which highlights how the failure to engage a salient domestic social issue has corrosive long term effects on a president's reputation with the American public and on the perception of his party in general.

Over the past five years leaders around the world, including President Bush, have reacted to the increase in obesity among their populations and amplified government action to combat the epidemic. American public perception, however, does not reflect this reality. The simple fact of developing a program that speaks to this issue will result in positive short term effects and avoid lasting repercussions resulting from a failure to engage this topic. Despite potentially unsustainable effects, short term success increases political capital and allows presidents to engage other items on the agenda.

Reagan experienced and President Bush experiences a high level of public expectations concerning their roles and responsibilities in domestic social affairs. Currently, the president competes with a number of actors, including interest groups, the public, Congress, Supreme Court, press, and media, to create perceptions of his domestic social policy and ultimately to determine its effectiveness. More specifically, the public is politically active, exploiting media fora like the internet, radio, and television to express their opinions and forming myriad interest groups, think tanks, and grass roots initiatives to affect public policy. Increased media coverage in the modern era accompanies a high level of expectations, encourages transparency and accountability within the executive branch, and demands that presidents deal with the public on a frequent and detailed level.

The way a president handles select domestic social issues demonstrably affects his reputation, as determined by public opinion polls and anecdotal evidence, within a certain group and the public at large. Furthermore, a president's inaction, avoidance, or failure to engage certain issues affects more than his short term reputation with consequences resonating both during and after his presidency. The public segment of a president's power base is likely to become even more demanding, interactive, and responsive in the future. It is essential that future presidents understand the opportunities and potential liabilities of their relationship with the public in order to achieve the greatest amount of success.

Consequently, President Bush must engage the obesity issue because of both short term and long term effects. There is substantial scholarly literature on president-public relations supporting the rationale for urgently engaging the obesity epidemic in the

United States. Reagan's successful relationship with the public on the issue of drugs demonstrates a successful attempt to engage the public on an important domestic social issue. Finally, Reagan's decision to avoid the domestic HIV/AIDS health epidemic until late in his presidency illustrates a failure to engage the public resulting in public disapproval, and highlights both short and long term effects of this decision on his presidency and the Republican Party. These examples provide insight for future presidents and advocate that President Bush "go public" with the obesity issue.

Literature Review: Going Public Arguments

Public support is the ability to translate public approval into presidential power. The president's relationship with the public significantly affects his success in office. This is corroborated by a 1985 study in the *American Political Science Review* where a "1 percent increase in a president's public support level increases the president's legislative approval rate by approximately 1 percent."² There are two prevalent schools of thought among presidential scholars that define the source of a president's power and its relationship to the public. The late presidential scholar Richard Neustadt champions the legislative presidency and defines presidential power based on powers enumerated in the Constitution, public prestige, and professional reputation. Neustadt argues that public prestige influences a president's ability to create policy and to affect key decision makers. According to his framework, "presidential power is the power to persuade and the power to persuade is the power to bargain," therefore the legislative and rhetorical presidencies work in tandem to further presidential objectives.³ Furthermore, as a president's public prestige increases so does his professional reputation, which builds his credibility inside Washington and his ability to facilitate progress while in office.

In contrast, Samuel Kernell advocates the rhetorical presidency and the notion of presidents "going public" to accomplish their agenda. Kernell challenges Neustadt's conception of presidential power and argues that presidential leadership is grounded in the capacity to lead the public and that "going public" fundamentally violates bargaining.⁴ Kernell argues further that "going public" is not aimed and should not aim to replace bargaining, however, it is a tool upon which modern presidents increasingly rely. He believes that frequent appeals to the public through television, the internet,

² Rivers, Douglas and Rose. "Passing the President's Program: Public Opinion and Presidential Influence in Congress." *American Journal of Political Science*. Vol 29, Number 2, 1985, 183.

³ Neustadt, Richard E. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, pg 11.

⁴ Kernell, Samuel. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 3rd ed, pg 2.

newspapers and magazines are a regular component of the president's toolbox. Some presidential scholars argue that environmental factors are the most influential in shaping public opinion and approval, however most agree that going public has some concrete effects or presidents would not engage in activities to stir public opinion.⁵ Thus, presidential appeals to American citizens produce positive outcomes of strengthening the president's power base and mobilizing the public to focus on change.

Successfully “Going Public”

During his presidency, Ronald Reagan established a strong relationship with the American public and earned the title “The Great Communicator.” In contrast to the norm, Gallup Polls registered Reagan’s public approval at 51% upon entrance to the office with an increase to 63% at the conclusion of his tenure, making him the only man to accomplish this reversal in public opinion throughout the history of the presidency.⁶ Ultimately, it was President Reagan’s presence in the media, particularly through televised appearances, that gathered the support of the American public to help him rally the nation, govern, and accomplish his presidential agenda.

One successful example of Reagan “going public” was his decision to fight a “War on Drugs.” Commentary from a 1986 Gallup Poll suggests that, “perhaps the best single indication of the public’s growing concern over drug abuse is the extraordinary change in attitudes toward marijuana. As recently as 1980, only 43% favored criminal penalties for the possession of small amounts of ‘pot.’ Today, fully 2/3 (67%) express this view.”⁷ In response, President Reagan addressed the nation on September 14, 1986, and declared a “War on Drugs.” His campaign enlisted the service of First Lady Nancy Reagan, famously credited with the slogan “Just Say No,” to become a spokeswoman against drugs and outlined six goals that last of which was, “to expand public awareness and prevention.”⁸ President Reagan’s engagement of the drug issue raised public awareness from being absent in the top ten of The Gallup Organization’s Most Important Problem poll to the fourth ranked problem at 8%.⁹ Furthermore, in 1988, Reagan quoted

⁵ Ostrom, Charles W., Jr. and Dennis Simon. “The Man in the Teflon Suit: The Environmental Connection, Political Drama, and Popular Support in the Reagan Presidency.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, v. 53: 1989, pg 384-385.

⁶ Gallup, George Jr. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1986*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1989, 7&42.

⁷ Gallup, George Jr. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1986*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1986, 193.

⁸ Reagan, Ronald. “Campaign Against Drug Abuse: September 14th 1986.” The Reagan Information Interchange. <http://www.reagan.com/ronald/speeches/rrs speech0b.shtml>

⁹ Gallup, 48, 179.

findings “that only 39 percent of high school seniors reported using illicit drugs during the past year, down from 53% in 1980,”¹⁰ and by September 1989, 62% of Americans were willing to pay a higher federal income tax to fight drugs.¹¹

Reagan suffered a public setback from the Iran Contra Scandal from which he slowly recovered by the end of his presidency. A July 17, 1988, Gallup Poll revealed that 45% of Americans approved, 45% disapproved, and 10% help no opinion of Reagan’s handling of the drug epidemic.¹² This was the first time Gallup asked the question making a concrete benchmark difficult, however; Reagan’s drug approval ratings mirror other domestic issues such as the economy with 46% approval and 49% disapproval suggesting a strong link between the drug issue and overall public opinion on domestic issues.¹³ Ultimately, Reagan’s solid foundation helped President Bush continue the war against drugs. Bush’s September 9, 1989, speech outlining a strategy to fight drugs, achieved a 72% public approval rating and mirrored his domestic and overall public approval ratings.¹⁴

A Failure to “Go Public”

Reagan supported HIV and AIDS research and funded the CDC and NIH studies that discovered virus. In a Congressional Research Service study titled *AIDS Funding for Federal Government Programs: FY1981-FY1999*, author Judith Johnson found that overall, the federal government spent \$5.727 billion on AIDS under Ronald Reagan.¹⁵ The president made a conscious decision, however, not to publicly address homosexuality and the AIDS epidemic viewing it as a problem like the “measles and it would go away,” says Reagan’s White House physician Brigadier General John Hutton.¹⁶ Even if the Reagan Administration did not harbor hard feelings against homosexuals, or victims of HIV and AIDS, by the time it addressed the epidemic, it cultivated a perception of insensitivity that permeated the administration and continues to the present day.

Reagan’s decision to delay addressing the HIV/AIDS issue provides strong evidence that the failure to “go public” can have both short term effects on a president’s reputation and long term effects on his legacy and his party’s reputation. In contrast to the

¹⁰ Cannon, Lou. *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991, 25.

¹¹ Gallup, George Jr. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1988*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1989, 193.

¹² *Ibid*, 116.

¹³ Gallup, George Jr. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1987*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1988, 214.

¹⁴ Gallup, George Jr. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1987*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1990, 190.

¹⁵ Murdock, Deroy. “Anti-gay Gipper: A lie about Reagan.” *National Review Online*. 3 December 2003. <http://www.nationalreview.com/murdock/murdock200312030913.asp>

¹⁶ Cannon, Lou. *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991, 814.

assessment of President Reagan's former Director of Communications, David Gergen, that Reagan did not dodge "issues of the day,"¹⁷ opponents argue that Reagan purposely failed to address the growing AIDS epidemic in the nation. In 1987, two years after learning about its lethality Reagan declared AIDS to be "public health enemy Number One," but, "he remained reluctant to use his presidential bully pulpit to send a clear public message about the AIDS epidemic."¹⁸ In 1987, 53% of Americans felt the government was not doing enough to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic.¹⁹ Reagan responded with a pamphlet called, "Understanding AIDS" that the Surgeon General mailed to 107 million households in 1988. Its purpose was to educate "Americans on AIDS, telling how it was transmitted sexually, that heterosexuals can contract it too, and that it was 100% lethal...and stressed safe sex."²⁰ Of the 82% of Americans who received the pamphlet, 65% said that it affected their understanding of the disease "not very much" or "not at all."²¹

An April 6, 2002, Gallup Poll showed that 73% of Americans approved of the way Reagan handled his job while in office.²² This sentiment was not echoed throughout the country; however, as waves of rhetoric from homosexual activists blasted Reagan's perceived approach to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. At the time of his death 2004, Matt Foreman, of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force said, "I wouldn't feel so angry if the Reagan administration's failing was due to ignorance or bureaucratic ineptitude. No, we knew then it was deliberate. The government's response was dictated by the grip of evangelical Christian conservatives who saw gay people as sinners and AIDS as God's well-deserved punishment." Dr. Mervyn Silverman, who served as director of the San Francisco Department of Health when AIDS was first declared an epidemic in the early 1980s, echoes this sentiment saying, "His silence was deafening. [Reagan] is portrayed as a compassionate and caring individual who brought people out of the doldrums, but his silence on AIDS was tragic."²³

Notwithstanding the existence of the gay Republican group, the Log Cabin Republicans, homosexuals tend then, as now, to politically affiliate themselves with the Democratic Party. Despite supporting traditional republican strongholds like free market

¹⁷ Gergen, David. *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership Nixon to Clinton*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p 217.

¹⁸ Cannon, 816.

¹⁹ Gallup, George Jr. The *Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1987*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1988, 274.

²⁰ Merenbloom, Sam. "Ronald Reagan: 40th President."

http://userpages.umbc.edu/~cgehrm1/pres_site/presidents/rr.html

²¹ Gallup, George Jr. The *Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1988*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 1989, 118.

²² Gallup, George Jr. The *Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2002*. Wilmington; Scholarly Resources Inc, 2003, 96.

²³ Nichols, John. "Another Mourning in America." *Common Dreams New Center*. 14 June 2004.

<http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0614-11.htm>

economics, limited government, and low taxes, many homosexuals reject the Republican Party for espousing an anti-gay stance, part of which may be attributed to the lasting effects of Reagan's estrangement from homosexuals.

Reagan could have used his access and influence to affect a larger portion of Americans, to convey information about transmission and risky behavior, and to increase overall public understanding of the epidemic. A "coalition of minorities" within America represented public outrage at Reagan's omission; however it was not pivotal to his ratings at the time. Here Reagan's decision reflected aspects of his core beliefs, and he accepted the consequences for a failure to dramatically further understanding of the causes and treatment of the disease. His failure is reflected in the staggering statistic that between the early 1980s and 1989, "55,000 Americans had died from AIDS," (more than the number of combat deaths from the Korean War and America's twenty five year involvement in Vietnam).²⁴ It also contributed to an explosion in the number of HIV/AIDS cases among the American public during the early 1990s, particularly among homosexuals and the African American community, which he may have had the capacity to delay or prevent. Reagan's failure to substantively address the HIV/AIDS epidemic serves as a cautionary tale that inaction can have extraordinary consequences, alienates some American citizens, and affects a president's reputation during his tenure and over time.

The Obesity Epidemic

Certain elements of the Bush Administration and private organizations, such as the Cato Institute, treat obesity as a private issue not ripe for government intervention.²⁵ There are substantial elements in both the public and private sector; however that support an increased level of funding to fight obesity and argue that President Bush should fully engage the issue. Whether obesity is a choice is beyond the scope of this paper, rather the object is to demonstrate that it has moved from a private health issue to a public epidemic, with strong nationwide economic and health related consequences, which requires increased government action. Consequently, Bush can increase his standing with the American public by taking credit for previously instituted anti-obesity measures and for initiating new courses of action to combat the epidemic.

Obesity is on track to overtake smoking as the number one preventable cause of death in the United States with over 400,000 deaths occurring each year. The Weight-

²⁴ Cannon, 24.

²⁵ Boaz, David. "Obesity and 'Public Health'?" Cato Institute. 20 July 2004.
http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=2746

control Information Network (WIN), a part of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), estimates that 2 in 3 Americans are overweight with a Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than 25 and that 1 in 3 Americans are obese with a BMI greater than 30. A normal BMI ranges from 20-25. WIN statistics indicate that “From 1988 to 2000, the prevalence of extreme obesity (BMI ≥ 40) increased from 2.9 to 4.7 percent, up from 0.8 percent in 1960. In 1991, four states had obesity rates of 15 percent or higher, and none had obesity rates above 16 percent. By 2000, every state except Colorado had obesity rates of 15 percent or more, and 22 states had obesity rates of 20 percent or more.”²⁶

The increasing number of preventable health issues has a strong impact on the health care system, with an estimated 5% of all health care costs going to treat obesity. This translated into \$78.5 billion dollars in 1998, alone, to treat overweight and obese patients.²⁷ Furthermore, the obesity epidemic presents various indirect economic costs such as increased morbidity and mortality rates. “Morbidity costs are defined as the value of income lost from decreased productivity, restricted activity, absenteeism, and bed days. Mortality costs are the value of future income lost by premature death.”²⁸ The impact of lost productivity resulting from obesity is rapidly increasing with a “50% increase in lost productivity, 36% increase in restricted activity, and 28% increase in number of bed days.”²⁹

The NIH Obesity Research Task Force, established under the Bush administration in April 2003, developed a strategic plan to coordinate efforts across public and private agencies and to educate the public about obesity’s serious health risks. It specifically emphasizes the increased risk for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, urinary incontinence, gallbladder disease, sleep disorders, cancer, psychological problems and mental disorders.³⁰ To address the epidemic the Senate passed the Improved Nutrition and Physical Activity Act (IMPACT) in November 2003, which still waits passage in the House of Representatives.³¹ Additionally, President Bush advocates the “HealthierUS” challenge, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, and USDA nutrition

²⁶ National Institutes of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Weight-control Information Network. “Statistics Related to Overweight and Obesity.” Last updated 6 October 2004.

<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/statistics/index.htm#what>

²⁷ Finkelstein, EA, Fiebelkorn, IC, Wang, G. “National medical spending attributable to overweight and obesity: How much, and who’s paying?” *Health Affairs* 2003; W3:219–226.

²⁸ CDC: “Overweight and Obesity- Economic Consequences.” Last updated 25 June 2004.

http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/economic_consequences.htm

²⁹ Finkelstein, 219.

³⁰ CDC: “Overweight and Obesity-Health Consequences.” Last updated 25 June 2004.

³¹ American Heart Association. “Improved Nutrition and Physical Activity Act: Fact Sheet.” 2005.

<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3010187>

programs in schools.³² In 2005, the Bush Administration allocated the National Institute of Health (NIH) \$440 million to study the disease and to determine the causes and effects of obesity.³³

In reality, the Bush administration is spending money and creating programs to combat the obesity epidemic, however, public perception does not reflect that reducing obesity, particularly childhood obesity, is a high priority.³⁴ There are greater rhetorical and legislative steps necessary to combat the disease, which does not seem to show any signs of reversal and continually increases economic and health care costs. The time to engage the obesity issue is now.

World Leaders Take Action

The obesity epidemic is a global issue. Prakash Shetty, a representative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations states, "We believe obesity is a significant problem that needs to be dealt with, along with the problem of the underfed."³⁵ The World Health Organization argues further, that "Paradoxically coexisting with under-nutrition, an escalating global epidemic of overweight and obesity – "globesity" – is taking over many parts of the world. If immediate action is not taken, millions will suffer from an array of serious health disorders."³⁶ The WHO published an obesity report in January 2005, entitled the *Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity, and Health*, which the Bush Administration failed to embrace. Instead the administration pressured the WHO to rescind its recommendations in favor of strong personal responsibility without government intervention.

World leaders, particularly in France, Italy, England, Australia, and Denmark, have responded to the WHO's call and engaged obesity head-on. These efforts represent only the start of government involvement but already reveal the large symbolic element of government action with regard to public approval. In France, vending machines with soda and junk food are not allowed in schools. Britain placed restrictions on junk food advertising and implemented a color coding system to educate consumers about healthy

³² "Newly Reelected Leader Shares his Stance on Health and Fitness with Leading Healthy Living Site; Emphasizes a 'Balanced Lifestyle'." 15 November 2004. <http://biz.yahoo.com/iw/041115/075970.html>

³³ American Obesity Association. "Obesity Research." Last updated 7 February 2005. http://www.obesity.org/subs/fastfacts/Obesity_Research.shtml

³⁴ Langer, Gary. "America's Obesity Crisis Americans Are Concerned About Weight, but Few Take Action." 30 May 2004 ABCNews/Time Magazine Poll. http://a.abcnews.com/sections/us/Living/Obesity_poll_040530.html

³⁵ International Obesity Task Force. "The Developing World's New Burden: Obesity." Accessed 11 March 2005. <http://www.iotf.org/>

³⁶ World Health Organization. "Nutrition: Controlling the Global Obesity Epidemic." Last updated 3 September 2003. <http://www.who.int/nut/obs.htm>

dietary selections.³⁷ Furthermore, Australian Prime Minister John Howard launched “Building a Healthy Active Australia” in June 2004, as part of the government’s \$116 million package to combat obesity.³⁸ Leaders can use this symbolic element to their advantage with public relations and translate public support into presidential power.

Consequently, President Bush’s failure to engage the obesity issue will become apparent in comparison to world leaders who take more steps to combat the disease within their countries. Besides the current criticism from world leaders, history will assess Bush by comparing his actions, or the perception of a gap of inaction, to his counterparts throughout the world.

Learning from the Great Communicator

President Bush and future presidents can learn from Ronald Reagan’s communications strategy with the American public. To help policy succeed with the public the president must: convey a clear, optimistic vision to build public confidence, understand how and when to use different communication forums, speak empathetically with the American people, and assume responsibility for mistakes.

Upon inauguration, Ronald Reagan demonstrated a unified, cohesive strategy for his presidency. Unlike, his predecessor Jimmy Carter, Reagan did not lose valuable time to engage the Congress during the “honeymoon” period and avoided many of the mistakes regarding “haste, hubris, and ignorance” that Neustadt argues plague incoming presidents.³⁹

Furthermore, Reagan followed in the footsteps of FDR and never lost hope in the American people. His optimism, vision, and devotion to individual responsibility and freedom that he openly and frequently communicated to the public enabled him to lead the nation through the worst recession since the Great Depression and to the culmination of the Cold War.

Reagan’s command of storytelling enabled him to effectively handle the public’s reaction to the attack on marines in Lebanon and the ensuing Grenada invasion. His approval ratings could have plummeted substantially during the crisis; however, Reagan crafted a story to explain the situation to the American people. By describing the rationale of the administration he treated them as equals and encouraged a transparent

³⁷ BBC News. “The Year in Issues: Obesity.” Last updated 29 December 2004.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/4060049.stm>

³⁸ Australian Government: Department of Health and Ageing. “Australian Government Tackles Obesity through Ground Breaking Schools Programme.” 29 June 2004.
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/Publishing.nsf/Content/health-mediarel-yr2004-ta-abb089.htm>

³⁹ Neustadt, 230-268.

atmosphere. A similar point can be raised with respect to Reagan's handling of the Challenger explosion. Reagan used an excerpt from "High Flight" to highlight the crew's bravery and sacrifice and to "use pictures to drive public opinion."⁴⁰

President Reagan was a master of the media. He knew how and when to use it to his advantage and initially avoided overexposure that could diminish his capacity to rouse public support. A natural ability to speak in front of large audiences and a pervasive sense of humor made the majority of Americans feel comfortable that Reagan had their best interests at heart.

Reagan treated the American public as if he were one of them and empathized with their concerns. The top three priorities on his transition agenda were the economy, the economy, and the economy. Reagan recognized the pall that enveloped the American people after Carter's pessimistic presidency and used his relationship with the public to help him turn around the nation. He restored integrity to the office of the presidency after years of decline that began with Johnson's refusal to run for re-election, followed by Watergate and Nixon's fall from power, Ford's battle with inflation, and Carter's failed negotiations for hostages in Iran.

A final suggestion for a president's successful relationship with the public, which in hindsight Reagan's communications director David Gergen recommends, is for every president to schedule regular press conferences because they are, "the best vehicle we have for ensuring responsible government, and they serve as a stiff disciplinary force upon policy-making within the executive branch."⁴¹ Ultimately, press conferences encourage transparency and allow for immediate public feedback. Not every president can or will be as skillful of a storyteller as Reagan but each can develop a unique style grounded in the principles of optimism, clarity, honesty, preparation, transparency, and integrity to build a successful relationship with the American public.

Future Implications

President Bush should address the obesity epidemic because of the short term and long term effects. Although there is not a specific "obese" constituency, Bush's legacy could be marred because of inaction towards this issue. Bush risks being blamed for rising health care costs and lowered productivity and being compared unfavorably with other nations who have already started to combat the epidemic more publicly and to a greater degree.

⁴⁰ Gergen, 233.

⁴¹ Gergen, 187.

President Bush's failure to address an issue that he can impact relates to Reagan's avoidance of the HIV/AIDS epidemic until late in his tenure. Reagan's successes shows that there are several methods that President Bush may use to "go public" and engage the American people. First, Bush should illuminate the efforts his Administration has already undertaken to combat the epidemic. The study of Reagan's expenditure on HIV/AIDS research demonstrates that he championed the cause more than history gives him credit. Just like HIV/AIDS, money is being spent on anti-obesity measures but public perception does not reflect this fact. Bush should consider how the money can be better spent and how he can explain the current programs to America. Ultimately, perception dictates reality.

Additionally, President Bush can get the message out to all Americans in his next State of the Union Address. It has been noted that for foreign policy, economic policy and civil rights policy "merely mentioning a problem to the public heightens public concern with the policy problem" and that "Presidential policy emphasis in the State of the Union Address clearly sets the public's problem agenda, but not for long."⁴² Applying these findings to domestic social policy, Bush should introduce a "War on Obesity" and follow through with additional appeals to rally public support.

Furthermore, the Bush can support the WHO's Obesity Report and begin to make changes to regulations in the advertising industry, especially for advertisements geared towards children. The "fat tax" should be reconsidered, in addition to efforts like the First Lady promoting an anti-obesity vision and programs throughout the country.

For any legislative action, President Bush should address the issue in terms of direct and indirect costs. He should frame obesity as both a health and an economic issue that directly affects Medicaid and Medicare expenses and indirectly lowers productivity, increases "lost days" at work, and results in premature deaths.

Presidents must balance relationships with actors that are internal and external to the executive branch of government. A president must master his relations with the American public to wield the greatest amount of power and influence in Washington. The potential outcome of a mobilized public that is focused on change remains extremely powerful. Evidence throughout Reagan's presidency demonstrates that a president's relationship with the public significantly impacts his ability to govern, to accomplish his agenda, and his reputation over time. Consequently, President Bush must engage the obesity epidemic with the public now.

⁴² Cohen, Jeffery. "Presidential Rhetoric and the Public Agenda," *American Journal of Political Science*. Vol 39, No 1, 1995, pg 102.

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